

# Retracing Trevelyan? Historical Practice and the Archive of the Feet

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## RETRACING TREVELYAN? HISTORICAL PRACTICE AND THE ARCHIVE OF THE FEET.

This essay explores current debates in the discipline of history, asking how and why an outdoors praxis – the archive of the feet – has found a new role at a moment when historians seek useful ways of contributing to ecological and posthumanist agendas. The paper looks back to the work of G.M. Trevelyan, with whom the idea of practising history on foot is inextricably associated, asking how his equivocal example might inform current practice. In exploring the possibilities of movement for provoking imaginative engagement with past lifeways, the paper introduces a current project to write a history of the British and Irish archipelago from the perspective of its Atlantic coasts; this involves travelling all these coasts by kayak and on foot in 2016-17.

This essay explores current debates in the discipline of history, asking how and why an outdoors praxis – the archive of the feet – has found a new role at a moment when historians seek useful ways of contributing to ecological and posthumanist agendas. The paper looks back to the work of G.M. Trevelyan, with whom the idea of practising history on foot is inextricably associated, asking how his equivocal example might inform current practice. In exploring the possibilities of movement for provoking imaginative engagement with past lifeways, the paper introduces a current project to write a history of the British and Irish archipelago from the perspective of its Atlantic coasts; this involves travelling all these coasts by kayak and on foot in 2016-17.

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The discipline of history is currently undergoing, as perhaps it always is, something of an identity crisis. Since the 1970s, theoretically-engaged, politically-active historians have largely seen their social mission as relating to inequality and questions of identity. Social history and cultural history have ruled the discipline, and extraordinary amounts of work has been devoted to refining how the holy trinity of social analysis – class, race & gender – can illuminate the experience of those marginalised by traditional historical practice and by the injustices of the archive. Foucault, Butler & Bourdieu have been the prestige theorists, with social inequality seen as culturally and ideologically constructed, as well as being the one great problem of the present. Strangely, given the emphasis on inequality, economic history almost died in the decades between the 1970s and the 2000s. All materialist forms of history were well and truly off the menu; language, discourse and ideology were the crucial underpinnings of what historians did and what, in university methodology modules, they taught students to do.

Working in this framework, history was slow to arrive at a conjuncture that disciplines more attuned to spatial scholarship and ecological imperatives had already reached. In 1996, for instance, Cheryll Glotfelty gave voice to a theme raised by historians some fifteen years later:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed you would never know that there was an earth at all' (vii).

Recently, a rapidly increasing number of historians have added their voices to the array of scholars asking whether climate change and ecology frame the most pressing problems of the present. Since the crash of 2008, economic history has stuttered back to life and structure and material, rather than agency and ideas, are back in fashion (Adelman & Levy, 2014). Although (as so often) late to the party, many historians have begun to explore how history can assist in the task of recontextualising humanity, in particular ridding our worldviews of a strict human non-human divide by embracing animal histories, material histories and posthumanist agendas. Latour & Morton have replaced Foucault & Bourdieu as theorists of choice. This is often now referred to as history's 'material turn': a counterpoint to the linguistic turn of the 1970s (Joyce & Bennett, 2010).

It is this turn that has either instigated or revealed the current identity crisis. Firstly, many are simply turned off by the new materialism. Those who have spent decades analysing social inequality, embedded in the diverse theoretical world of the 1990s, have objected to a theoretical turn in which that, at least at first, tended to cite wealthy middle-aged white-male demagogues such as Morton and Latour, ~~en more than others and issued more who seem to issue more~~ from the institutional world of philosophy departments than from the counter-culture agendas of critical theory, still dominate reading lists and references at the expense of scholars such as Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett whose approaches offer necessary correctives to some early orthodoxies of the new materialism as imbibed by historians. But even among those who are taking the current turns there i's profound disagreement about what they mean for history, and what history is (Armitage & Guldi,

2014; Cohen & Mandler, 2015). We've even been thrown back into an old debate about whether history is a science or an art, or, to put that differently, a social science or a humanity.

Many recent publications have asked the same question: ~~if~~ ecological questions are the burning issue of the present, what can history contribute? Some explorations of this theme, such as *The History Manifesto*, co-written by Jo Guldi and David Armitage~~old~~ (chair of the Harvard history department), have argued that long-term perspectives and big data are the answer: social science techniques are built into a science-inspired philosophy of history. Mark Levene, in an essay entitled 'Climate Blues' argued something similar but even more dramatic – that a total scientific reskilling is required for history to fulfil its potential in the coming decades. We will be forced, he writes, in the light of urgent new ethical responsibilities, to tear down all our assumptions about how history works: to reconsider the basic architecture of the human experience in order to understand how we arrived at this end game and how historians can be involved in its mitigation (Levene, 2013, 149).

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Yet the number of historians willing to go along with these manifestos, or who think history can or should compete as a science or social science, is limited. Equally influential groups are therefore emphasising the storytelling aspect of historical practice: the idea that history is most purposeful and persuasive in its most creative and communicative forms. The discipline, initiatives such as 'Storying the Past' suggest, is best with its share of poetry and artistry in place. The material turn must (as so far it has failed to do) engage the emotions; it must be able to place its readers' own subjectivities in long-term context and it must actually find ways to engage both intellect and emotions. The purpose of history in addressing climate change, these historians argue, is to find the stories that can give ecological themes immediacy.

This debate echoes one that was fought in the first half of the twentieth century. And historians now are increasingly looking back to the side of that debate which seemed to have lost and was thus eclipsed for the second half of the century.

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In 1903, the Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge, J. B. Bury, gave a lecture in which he proclaimed that history should be conducted along scientific principles. In the audience was a young George Macaulay Trevelyan, a historian who, in the subsequent three decades, would write several major books on British & Italian history, and whose great uncle was the most famous of all Victorian historians, Lord Macaulay. Trevelyan was so incensed with Bury's definition of history that he immediately set about writing a response entitled 'Clio: A Muse'. Trevelyan argued that those who conducted history as a science were beginning to dominate the discipline to such an extent that he was fighting a lone battle in defending the virtues of history as art. Literature, emotion and speculative thought, Trevelyan lamented, were being banished from how people interpreted and expressed the meanings of the past (Trevelyan, 1913, 30-31).

Trevelyan was a splenetic individual. He regarded his peers and their methods with undisguised disdain. But his greatest rage was reserved for the modern world of motor cars and urban sprawl. He saw the act of rural walking as a defiant gesture against bourgeois ideals and the anodyne idea of the science of history. This was so much the case that in 1913 he republished 'Clio: a Muse', paired with an essay that has become his most anthologised, entitled simply 'Walking'. By this time, Trevelyan's habit of formulating ideas while tramping Hadrian's Wall was well-known, and this essay attempted to conceptualise, contextualise and explain this practice. It makes walking a counter-cultural act: 'there are many schools of walking, and none of them orthodox', Trevelyan insists (67). Walking places him in a long line of heterodox figures from mendicants and Puritans to the Seer of Ecclefechan, Thomas Carlyle: all of them, he insists, were characterised by a fiery spirit and a fine ascetic rigour.

Carlyle is presented as the patron saint of historians as walkers (60-61). He carried, Trevelyan claims, 'the art of walking and talking to perfection as one of the highest of human functions'. 'Those who have gone walks with Carlyle', Trevelyan insists, 'tell us that then most of all the fire kindled. And because he talked well when he walked with others, he felt and thought all the more when he walked alone, given up to his bits of reflection in the silence of the moors and hills. He was alone when he walked his fifty-four miles in the day, from Muirkirk to Dumfries'.

Those who walked with Carlyle, including Irving & Emerson, also referred to his walking persona as intensified and volcanic. Freed from physical enclosure and domestic propriety his actions and language were demonstrative so that many of the most incandescent phrases of the unique language known as 'Carlylese', were first uttered while gesticulating at a companion on the hillside. It is remarkable how many visitors to Carlyle describe him in geological terms as though he were part of the landscape (Richardson, 1995, 148). Emerson refers to 'a living, not extinct volcano whose lava-torrents of fever frenzy enveloped all things'. He depicts Carlyle creating a placelore of the lowlands as he hikes, inventing landmarks to navigate by with names such as 'the grave of the last sixpence' (Emerson, 1856, 21). They walked together in Scotland, in the Lakes and in Wiltshire and it is clear in Emerson's record of visiting Stonehenge that Carlyle was the real tourist attraction. One Carlyle biographer has even gone so far as to describe their walks north of the border as 'the most memorable meeting on a Scottish moor since Macbeth encountered the witches' (Kaplan, 1983, 202).

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Carlyle hated the present. He railed against the ways in which people had become machine-like in head and heart (Carlyle, 1829). Walking was his resistance to everything mechanical. It was his source of optimism, because he did believe that a different nineteenth-century – shorn of the positivism and machine-like rationality that had been born in the eighteenth – was possible. In disrupting the world of Bentham and Voltaire, and of the human mind conceived as a calculating machine, the French Revolution was the single noble act of the eighteenth century: the 'grand universal suicide' in which a century set its otherwise miserable self alight (Carlyle, 1858). The result was a world teetering on the edge of the most glorious possibilities but with disruptive forces of caution and reductive rationality lurking. Either Utilitarians and industrialists would continue to consolidate their bland authority, or new space would be created for serious-minded people to exercise imagination and reflection in pursuit of transcendental rather than material, mental rather than physical, growth. Carlyle's wild moorland wandering marked his own rejection of Utilitarian modes. Historians who were contemporary with Carlyle valued walking perhaps as much as he did, though for different reasons. A.P. Stanley for instance, was like a living version of Walter Scott's Antiquary, thinking nothing of tramping 30 miles to a historic site, and possessing an

absurd conviction that he could smell, taste and touch the past. He is described crawling round Canterbury Cathedral, nose to the stone, seeking specks of bloodstain from the murder of Thomas Becket. He visited Greek historical sites in the same way, including the plain of Thermopylae where he saw little due to fog, but watched leaves drift by on the wind and knew in his soul that this same wind had tousled the locks of Leonidas.

Trevelyan combined these two modes. He walked for his temper and for some kind of mystical union with the past. Yet he rejected outright Carlyle's notion of walking and talking as something only fitting as a rehearsal for real, solitary walking. And, in his usual acerbic style, he rejected walking by road or in undramatic scenery: 'you cannot do much with your immortal soul in a day's walk in Surrey' (Trevelyan, 1913, 60). Instead, he extolled

the northern torrent of molten peat-hag that we ford up to the waist, to scramble, glowing warm-cold, up the farther foxglove bank; the autumnal dew on the bracken and the blue straight smoke of the cottage in the still glen at dawn; the rush down the mountain side, hair flying, stones and grouse rising at our feet; and at the bottom the plunge into the pool below the waterfall (70).

In walking for his temper, Trevelyan described his legs as two doctors, who, when body and mind were out of step, provided the only cure. His writing on the power of walking to reconcile overflowing emotions is as intense, transcendental and geological as anything in Carlyle:

Every man must once at least in life have the great vision of Earth as Hell. Then, while his soul within him is molten lava that will take some lifelong shape of good or bad when it cools, let him set out and walk, whatever the weather, wherever he is...and let him walk grimly...to avoid the vulgar sights and faces of men, appearing to him, in his then daemonic mood, as base beyond all endurance. Let him walk until his flesh curse his spirit for driving it on, and his spirit spend its rage on the flesh in forcing it still pitilessly to sway the legs (65-6).

Trevelyan's walking is not an entry into unpeopled landscapes: it is not a celebration of pristine isolation. In his Stanley, rather than Carlyle, mode, he considered walking a route to



the past. Yet the links he found between past and present were wrapped so thickly in romanticism that he failed to see much of the social realities he intruded on:

The pleasure of losing your way on those hills leads to a push over broken ground to a glimmer of light that proves to come from some lonely farmstead, with the family gathered round the burning brands, in honest, cheerful poverty. (64)

Following old drove routes across gorse covered downs, dropping into the farmhouses of people detached from modern urban life, finding mountain routes in mist (which he called 'one of the great primeval games'): these were the reasons to be outdoors (80). Trevelyan believed such activities to hone historical sympathies and to provide space for the exercise of the imagination.

When elaborating these themes, Trevelyan set up his own great uncle, the archetypal champion of liberal progress, as a straw man. Thomas Babington Macaulay, Baron of Rothley, had written that if the Britain of 1685 could 'be, by some magical process, set before our eyes, we should not know one landscape in a hundred, or one building in ten thousand'. The past, Trevelyan, wished to insist, was still present in our world: 1685 could be met with on a walk (73). Imaginative connection with such histories through walking was a powerful corrective: it sustained a person's health precisely because it revealed the absurdity of the present world of speed and steel. When society rushed headlong into ruin, the historian's task was to imagine things differently, and to show what would be lost by unreflective scrambling after the ever larger and ever more immediate rewards of industrial modernity.

By the 1930s, Trevelyan was an icon of the outdoors movement. The war consolidated his Carlylean rage against his age and all it stood for. The connection he drew between technology and war (combined with his deep distrust of traditional religion) – led him to pursue a new creed of ruralism. As Michael Cunningham has put it, landscape had become his religion, scenery a site of pilgrimage & walking a form of worship (Cunningham, 2016b). He was fond of phrases like 'sacred union with nature' & threw himself into causes such as the Pilgrims Trust & Outward Bound as a kind of crusade against urban life. This was so central to his profile as a public historian that he was soon named the first president of the Youth Hostel Association; their headquarters is still called Trevelyan House (Cunningham, 2016a). Press coverage of that moment treated the identities of historian and outdoors

champion as self-evidently mutually reinforcing, never betraying a hint of surprise that the two practices had become enmeshed in this way.

Posterity obviously did not judge kindly this aristocratic historian who felt entitled to lollop across deer forests from which communities had been displaced by the violence of his relatives and peers. Time might have been less cruel had Trevelyan been capable of seeing the occupants of Scottish glens as multi-dimensional, living, people rather than as hazy evocations of both local colour and a rustic, carefree past he so desperately wished to see (re)vivified. Trevelyan's raging against modernity long looked overblown and absurd; his insistence that the gifts of the industrial revolution must be given up appeared unhinged.

Remnants of muddy-booted history survived longest in the highlands, where another aristocrat of Trevelyan's ilk, Archibald Haldane, continued to wander the hillsides in search of the Scottish past. Born into wealth and educated in Edinburgh and Oxford, Haldane began his working life as a lawyer, spending spare hours exploring hill paths and streams with a fishing rod slung across his shoulder. His early writing recounted these days of leisurely wandering and angling: *The Path by the Water* (1944) and *By Many Waters* (1946). But Haldane loved libraries almost as much as he loved trout: as Chair of Edinburgh's city libraries committee and trustee of the National Library of Scotland, he found himself surrounded by archival records of the highland routes and rivers he walked and angled. His interest was further piqued, and his research given richness, by chance encounters on riverside paths with old men who had once walked drove roads as they transported cattle from the western isles and northern highlands south. Haldane's books, *The Drove Roads of Scotland* (1952) and *New Ways through the Glens* (1962) could not have been written by anyone without intimate walker's knowledge of the highland paths alongside the detailed familiarity with Scottish community that Trevelyan entirely lacked.

But this was the last gasp of a long tradition that had lost high profile advocates by the 1960s. In 1966 Keith Thomas wrote of new kinds of scientific historian using 'the computer' to replace the research tools – 'the stout boots' – of the advanced historian of the previous generation. He was celebrating a respectable history that analysed data rather than following Trevelyan's footsteps by interpreting the past through creative and emotional

elaboration of ideas acquired by feel and through interaction with disreputable – unquantifiable – sources such as landscape. The new economic history – the cliometric revolution – seemed set to sweep all before it, promising a rigorous, scientifically assured and objective method for modelling the past (Thomas, 1966, 275-6).

A decade later, Thomas's own vision of the past was transformed when he, like many others was gradually embroiled in the cultural turn: convinced of the limits to quantification by new historical movements (Thomas, 2006, 3-5). The historical mode that saw off Trevelyan's vision of history as imaginative art had the most shortlived of victories, although the approaches it undermined were not revived. Those historians who changed Thomas' mind are still, perhaps, the most respected in the profession today – Joan Scott, Natalie Zemon Davies, Caroline Walker Bynum and Catherine Hall for instance – all of whom embraced positions much less theoretically naïve than the many 1960s historians who had wielded 'objectivity' as a realisable and politically neutral goal. It is in the hands of historians such as Scott and Hall that the holy trinity of social analysis (gender, race and class) was shown to be the most powerful means for historians to contribute to understanding both the past and present.

The changing priorities of historians in the last decade provide the first really substantive impulse to change the direction of the discipline from that associated with names like Scott's. The environmental humanities, and climate change as a context, are currently forcing historians to reread twentieth-century historiography and disentangle some historical techniques and impulses from the unpalatable politics of their first practitioners.

Where history since the 1970s had aimed to persuade society to move faster – radical movement towards diversity and destabilisation of social inequality – the new history has begun to veer towards a Trevelyan- & Carlyle-like belief that historians should be persuading society to decelerate. Although Trevelyan's blindness to the nature of social relations will always look distasteful, his critique of modernity no longer looks quite so reactionary. It can almost appear prophetic. This rediscovery of early twentieth century modes has, incidentally, a similar trajectory to the echoes and returns identified by David Matless among geographers across the same periods (Matless, 1991). A host of historians in the present practice their discipline with a renewed confidence in the archive of the feet, the

importance of place and landscape. Most importantly, they almost always believe in the necessity – rather than the madness – of confronting modernity head on. Theoretically, this often takes a peculiar contemporary form, often associated with rejection of the supposedly airy and abstract world of the linguistic turn and a re-rooting of scholarship in the realm of the real. Each year, more historians buy into the material concerns and speculative realism of Timothy Morton and Graham Harman; citations for theorist of place, practice and movement, such as Tim Ingold, rise exponentially among historians as do uses of concepts such as the ‘taskscape’, long adopted by archaeologists but only now finding a place in historical writing (Ingold, 1993).. Indeed historians are looking increasingly to archaeologists, geographers and anthropologists rather than literary scholars for their method and conceptual frameworks. In this atmosphere, historians such as Matthew Kelly turn from traditional history to write books like his *Quartz & Feldspar: a history of Dartmoor* written from a distinctly pedestrian perspective. Pedestrian histories of Cairngorm, the Grampians and the Western Isles are all now underway. It’s worth noting, too, how many of the major figures in the new nature writing, such as Helen MacDonald, were pursuing careers as historians before their writing took a different turn. And with the founding of the history department of the University of Highlands & Islands, a flourishing Scottish history department celebrates the archive of the feet – as both research tool and team-building enterprise – in ways that might not have happened two decades ago. Place and history, nature and culture are being pulled ever closer together.

Yet at the same time, the most famous critiques of current writing on nature and landscape relate to the ways in which it is often blinkered to culture and history: ‘quelling’ (as Kathleen Jamie famously put it) ‘our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with civilised lyrical words’ (Jamie, 2008, 26). Authors such as Jamie show how writing on nature must never **collude** **conspire** **in** the idea that the places it treats are yielding and empty; instead it must reveal the ways in which they are storied and perpetually contested. Their human heritage is coming to be recognised as a precondition for their protection just as much as their supposed wildness. The revival of historical practices such as crofting and machair management is a step in the process of preservation, shielding fragile ecosystems from the privations of big business. Where the farming practices of the late twentieth century dwelt only in the present, maximising current yields with little thought for futurity, current

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practices look to the future, emphasising sustainable usage, and achieve this through attention to the past, incorporating elements of revived tradition. The land-use and land-knowledge of previous centuries has a new prestige, even where much of its texture and detail has been lost. It is not, then, just historians who are feeling a need for nature, landscape and ecology, but nature writers, ecologists, landscape organisations and farming and fishing communities who are feeling a new need for historians. The *Comuinn Eachdraidh* (history societies) and crofting movements (including recent projects such as Machair Life) of the Outer Hebrides are among the most dramatic examples of this entanglement of history, tradition and productivity. One thing that all their interest in the past has in common is an assumption that it is human engagement with the past that matters: the localised interactions of individual people with their environment, the conflict between land users and land owners, and the stories through which knowledge was embedded in the taskscape are the reasons historical knowledge has a value.

In the light of all this, it might be argued that historians have something to offer only in so far as the legacy of the major historical movements of the 1970s-90s can be preserved within the framework of new ecological concerns: the choices that seem to be available to historians are not, in the end, mutually exclusive. Place and the cultures of nature need to be approached with the same attentiveness to individual lives and to human structures of power that show, whether through story or linguistic analysis, how inequalities are established and sustained; that is just as crucial as the analyses shaped by Latour and Morton that all too often achieve their insights at the expense of story and human detail. *The History Manifesto*, a spectacularly misguided attempt to reframe the discipline of history as an exercise in data gathering for policy makers (whether in response to climate change or other long term crises), promotes precisely that removal of the human from history, mocking and maligning studies in which individuals, issues of identity, or language loom large. A fusion of some small elements of the rediscovered art of history and the archive of the feet with the politics of the linguistic turn is as fruitful a way forward as a deep reskilling for the new age of a materialist scholarship. There is a risk that in seeking relevance to a world in which ecological concerns come to rival inequality as the great problem of the present, historians abandon precisely those aspects of their craft that other scholars might look to them for in the coming decades.

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The writing of nature and place has, since the turn of the century, been engaged in a sweeping and profound effort to reconceptualise the islands of the north-east Atlantic archipelago. It has raised awareness of the particularity of modern archipelagic experience and praised the virtues of the slow, echoing in some small ways Trevelyan's sense that other lifeways than predominant urban forms exist in Britain and Ireland. Historians are far behind the curve in assimilating this new outlook. Even the terms Great Britain and United Kingdom have not been challenged with quite the same vigour as in other disciplines: their Anglocentric implications are still not widely recognised and the unpicking of urban modernity as the central experience of the present has therefore hardly begun. Embracing geographical diversity too often means pursuing a tentative four nations history by adding a major urban centre or two - Newcastle, Cardiff or Glasgow perhaps - to studies that remain metropolitan in focus and inspiration.

Nor has the idea of the archipelagic really taken hold. This term has had many implications for work done in disciplines such as literary studies (Kerrigan, 2008; Brannigan, 2015). It has, for instance, drawn attention to the peculiarly modern detachment from water, and the place of sea and river travel in the economic, social and cultural history of the British Isles (Hayward, 2012). It has shown that the place of these islands in the geographical imagination of the present is wildly different from what it has been through most of history. Until very recently, the range of ways in which historians have tackled shoreline and seafaring themes has been excruciatingly narrow. Dealing with seas and coasts has meant naval history and the social history of major port towns. The geographies historians work in have thus seemed to owe more to the present than the past. When seminal history books treat movement – whether Eric Hazan's *The Invention of Paris: a History in Footsteps* or Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust* – it is always footsteps, road-travel and rail that are scrutinised. Although a few archaeologists have robustly protested that situation, Barry Cunliffe's *Facing the Ocean* being the most prominent example, historians have rarely taken up the challenge. They are not entirely alone. Even Tim Ingold's work dismisses watery travel as traceless and therefore historically unpromising. In contrast to the firm but inscribable terrain across which humans walk, he says, 'air and water are not entities that act' and backs this up with a

footnote observing that water 'is never an assemblage of discrete material objects' amenable to current forms of sociological analysis (Ingold, 2011, 92 & 247).

Looking back across the history of cartography the strangeness of this situation becomes clear. Early maps are striking for their revelations at the shifting edges of land and sea. Across decades, they reveal shorelines in natural ebb and flow, and show human interventions in the course of rivers. Since coasts and rivers were the most common form of political boundary and a place of unparalleled resources as well as the most frequent artery of travel, these maps shower them in attention. Inland spaces are often textureless, with few distinctions but those between valued and the valueless. Agricultural land, in many such maps, stretches surprisingly far up hillsides, but mountains themselves are mere lumps in profile: unshaped, uncounted and unloved. The coast, more than the land, is thronged with description, recording in words the things that resisted drawing.

In the seventeenth century, engraving replaced drawing as the mapper's favoured mode. The result was deadening: conventional symbols for forts and harbours replaced the local quirks that sketches could preserve or emphasise. Written glosses disappeared, as did, more slowly, illustrated insets. This was the moment when main roads began to be mapped. They soon became a pivotal feature as cartography's focus, like life itself, drifted landwards and towards urban centres. Today, our most familiar landscapes in paper or pixel are grids of roads, rail or underground tunnels. Our dashboards are adorned with moving maps that take the perspective of the thoroughfare. As the geographer Robert Harrison puts it: 'on the kind of maps most people use, one feature is exaggerated at the expense of everything else, the system of roads' (1977, 126). 'And yet', David Roediger writes, road maps 'are seen simply as objective maps, rather than as plottings tailored to a civilisation whose relationship to the natural world is utterly and perhaps fatally mediated by cars' (Roediger, 2002, 170).

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In recognising this shift, the work of geographers and cartographers such as Tim Robinson remains more sophisticated in its readings of island histories and past experience of coastal living than anything written by historians. And Robinson is a writer who balances the

material and the human with an extraordinary sureness of touch. Indeed, Robinson's work is the most compelling effort ever made to reframe the histories of the north-east Atlantic archipelago in terms of the geographical imaginations of past people. It is also the oeuvre that conveys most compellingly the richness of *dinnscheanchas* (historic Irish placelore) for English-language readers. Trained as a mathematician, Robinson was a successful London artist before the epiphany that 'art is the opposite of money' sent him scrabbling to the islands of the Irish Atlantic. What was planned as a fleeting escape became an existential recentring. Robinson has become as much a philosopher of placelore as a scientist or artist, his achievement less in record-keeping than meaning-making. When he and his wife Mairead arrived on their Aran Island sojourn, they found themselves 'hijacked' by Atlantic coastlines and histories (Marland, 2013). Both learnt Irish fast and, over decades, deeply, until most great honours of Irish language and culture have been bestowed on them.

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Within weeks of arriving, however, the question began to gnaw of how to represent a place so drastically misconstrued by the British military surveyors who had mapped Ireland in the aftermath of the 1801 Act of Union. Their records of placenames had prioritised sound over meaning, stripping the shore of its history in crude Anglicised translation. The task of mapping had been split in that era, between the new Ordnance Survey and the Admiralty's Hydrographic Unit, so that instead of the wide-ranging shoreline maps of previous centuries, two genres now existed: the landmap in which the sea was blank, and the admiralty chart in which the land was void. Lives lived across the strandline became impossible to represent.

Robinson's art became a science of reintegration and reconciliation: a cartography built not on measuring with new precision but on exploring the complex reciprocities between humans and their world. He wandered the angular stone walls of Aran through rain, shine and sea-mist absorbed in the question of how a single segment of earth's surface could be known in depth. 'I wore the network of tender little fields and bleak rocky shores into my skin' he told the ecocritic Pippa Marland 'until I could have printed off a map of them by rolling on a sheet of paper. But I was always aware of the infinity of ways in which the place exceeded my knowledge of it' (Marland, 2013).



The maps that resulted are rooted in earth science: built on geologies the Ordnance Survey ignored. They are layered with placelore, re-Irishing the shore with a millennium of accumulated custom. They always feature spaces ‘where land and sea entwine their twisted fingers’, because Robinson is most interested in lifeways that have been sidelined by the terrestrial focus of modern polities. And, because the cartographer ‘must be faithful to more than the measurable’, these maps are inked in freehand, reviving the artistic subjectivity that imperial cartographers had sought to banish from the craft (Robinson, 1981, 6). They say as much about time as space. The past is here on every scale from the birth of land to the recollections of the living, each a crucial component of a holistic quest. There is never an overarching narrative or an easy structure that imposes meanings. Indeed, Robinson is as critical of the Christian logic of the ninth century, which forced narrative structure onto the swirling well of old Irish lore, as he is of the rigid formulae of imperial cartography. His sites are thus opened to diverse interpretations rather than having meaning pinned through them. There is something determinedly anti-enlightenment in this approach: his researches don’t cohere into bright-lit histories of linear cause and effect but are ‘points of attachment of the historical web from which one can grope back along the strands into the darkness’ (Marland, 2013). The enlightenment principle being resisted is the effort to make a particular form of scientific method universal. The sciences, in that vision, elucidated laws operating everywhere the same and dismissed every shred of evidence that pointed to what the historian of exploration, Dorinda Outram, calls ‘the embeddedness of the natural order in a particular land’ (Outram, 1997, 470).

**Comment [P6]:** Maybe replace with a comma to avoid repetition of colon construction?

**Comment [P7]:** ref

**Comment [P8]:** ref

**Comment [P9]:** ref

**Comment [P10]:** embeddedness?

Robinson grounded his recovery of the Irish past in the same two unfashionable scientific tools as writers from Carlyle to Haldane: walking and talking. These are, he insists, the best methods to ensure ‘the moment by moment reintegration of body and world’ on which comprehension of place must be founded (Pine, 1987). He has written at length on the intellectual potential of these tools, but a statement he made to Marland about the mundane benefits of travelling on foot is most revealing of how both his practices operate. He echoes Trevelyan’s appearance at the crofter’s door, but in a refraction that is rich with empathy and social conscience rather than aristocratic ego:

**Comment [P11]:** ref

Once, a wealthy friend with a big car offered to help me in my explorations of Connemara. Since I wanted to revisit a few remote glens I accepted, and we roared off. Then, 'I must call in at that cottage,' I said, and we squealed to a stop. I knocked at the door, but apart from a twitching curtain there was no response - whereas if I had sweated up the hill, fallen off my old bike at the gate, asked for a bucket of water to mend a puncture, etc., all the lore of the valley would have been forthcoming over tea in the kitchen. But even bicycling is inferior to walking in this context. To appear out of the thickets behind an Aran cottage, or scramble down from the bare moon-mountains of the Burren into a farmyard, is, I find, a disarming approach, introducing me as obviously unofficial and dying for a cup of tea.

In a small seazone incorporating Aran, the Burren and Connemara (now widely known as 'the ABC of earthwonders') Robinson has revealed the potential of mobile methodologies for the reconceptualization of the coastlines and of what matters in the history of Britain and Ireland. His work has inspired many deep-mapping and community history projects in the Irish west, often advised by geographers or Irish Studies scholars, such as Nessa Cronin, at the National University Ireland Galway or the University of Cork (Cronin, 2017). Here, if anywhere, is the model for a historical reengagement with the archive of the feet. It is a model diametrically opposed to that of Carlyle since Robinson is fiercely suspicious of any appeal to the transcendental, enraptured instead by the immanence of the material: his is a warm, ecstatic philosophy of human embeddedness in the material world not just of earth but air and water too.

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Thanks to some unexpected changes in the direction of my research, it has recently become possible for me to attempt to contribute to this loosely interconnected body of pelagic, place-based literature. In July 2016 I set out to explore some of the ways in which travel by water might contribute to a historiography of Britain and Ireland. This project contributes to the revived, Trevelyan-esque, idea that movement through landscapes, sites of past labour and habitation, can be a rich research tool: a historian's adaptation of the archaeological

walkover survey. It attempts to explore how the particular skillset of the historian can inflect the established frameworks of nature and place writing.

This project is a journey, mainly by kayak but sometimes on foot, down all the Atlantic coasts of the British and Irish archipelago. Following historic sea routes and travelling for significant spells without returning to roads or present-day buildings (sleeping on the skerries, cliffs and islands in a waterproof sleeping bag), the journey aims to learn something of the experience of past travel and subsistence. Dividing the western coastlines into twelve geographical units (Shetland; Orkney; the Western Isles; the north-west mainland; Skye & the Small Isles; Argyll & Ulster; Connacht; Munster; Wales; Cornwall) it covers one leg each month for a year, interspersing travel with time in archives and discussion with each region's authorities on coastal life. The idea is to frame British history from coastal perspectives, seeing the Welsh, Gaelic and Nordic north and west as centres, and the Anglo east as remote periphery. The hope is also to find ways to comprehend and articulate the intense particularity of places – from Unst to Uist – that are either absent from most history books with 'Britain' in the title or else are treated as parts of an undifferentiated island edge. These regions do have much in common. Despite geological diversity, similar ingredients of land, sea and weather do shape island experience. But the very different cultures of the present have been made through diverse historical processes in both the long term (patterns of Norse settlement, or the experience of the Reformation), the medium term (differential geographies of clearances, the slave trade, empire or oil) and the short term (including the distribution of funding for geoparks, renewables and tourist amenities).

This journey also aims to test the potential for coastal kayaking as a historical method to match pedestrianism. Coasts are the parts of the landscape where change is most dramatic; they host thousands of the least accessible sites of past human action. The distant past perpetually rises from the ground – whether oyster shells from a three-millennia-old meal unearthed by rabbits in the dunes of Papa Westray, or the drowned and petrified forests visible at low tide in so many west-coast bays. Demographies have also been transformed: some stretches of this coastline are now emptier of human habitation than at any time since prehistory. One of the weaknesses inherent to Trevelyan's romanticism was a view of

landscape as permanent and coasts are the places at which his misconception comes most obviously undone.

Attacks on the idea of 'wilderness' and the wild have long been something of a cliché, not leading far beyond the bland truism that all of the British and Irish archipelago is shaped by humans. Many coastal regions demonstrate the fatuity of such statements: these are sites of human default not design, in which centuries of activity – in cut stone, dyke and field system – have been conclusively reclaimed by the wild. The social histories of animals – such as the fulmar, which invaded many of these coastlines in the mid twentieth century and now, like storm petrels in an iron-age broch, nest in many once-human structures – demonstrate the shifting balances between human and nature in ways that imbue even the urgent and all-enveloping narrative of the Anthropocene with some small hints of hope amidst the horror. In travelling 2,000 involuted coastal miles this journey aims to emphasise the scale of the Atlantic influence on island histories, showing how today's London-centric visions of Britain and, indeed, the concept of Britain itself, are (much like a kayaker) only passing through this littoral zone.

This is a project shaped by Tim Robinson's conceptualisation of historic coastal lifeways. Despite being conducted on foot, his work succeeded in drawing attention to those facets of the land that walking and conventional mapping do not usually reach. Wandering the cliffs of Aran provided an early epiphany: 'a cliff face is ignored by the conventional map', he noted, since it appears as a line of infinitesimal breadth. But a real cliff 'was a wide province of the islanders' mental landscape, a theatre of anecdote, tradition, boast and dream' (Robinson, 1986, 62-3; Pine, 1987). More life is lived vertically on coasts than anywhere else. Amphibious communities, operating where differential planes of land and sea conjoin, are invisible to the birds-eye view of most cartography. In drawing his Aran sheets Robinson indulged a subtle stretching of the shoreline, laying the cliff face almost in relief. A heady plunge becomes a space five millimetres wide, thick enough to swathe in placelore.

Robinson's maps are thus unique in making bare precipices as seen from a kayak as scrutable as a city. One example is the most famous historical site in Aran: the cliff-top fort of Dun Aonghasa. Labelled in the 1834 diaries of its first excavator, George Petrie, 'the most

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magnificent barbaric monument...in Europe, this is a site riddled with pre-Christian lore (Robinson, 1986, 96). Its building is ascribed to the mythical Aonghas, leader of the wild Fir Bolgs somewhere in the wide seam between Bronze and Iron Ages. Walls six metres high were constructed on the cliff edge. Now some parapets lie in ocean depths while the rest stand on the 'beetling brow' above. They tower 300ft over any boat that nears the Dun's exposed and undefended seaward edge.

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What is hidden in most maps is that the Dun itself has less presence in island lore than the cliffs beneath it. It stands over *an Sunda Caach* (the blind sound). This inlet leads to nothing and haunts the dreams of islanders as a place of shipwreck and the point where the isle will one day split in two. The O'Flaherty family lived across the blind sound from the Dun. Their home was the place the island went to dance, sing and tell tales. Two sons of this house are now renowned for their novels and short stories of Aran life. Liam O'Flaherty's tales include many depictions of Aran oceans. His dark romance, *The Black Soul* (1924), begins in the first storms of a hard winter when sour winds make for green and bilious seas and cause a stretch of Aran cliffs to fall. But it was his brother, Tom, who turned his pen most often to the crags. He published two collections of short stories, *Aran-Men All* (1934) and *Cliffmen of the West* (1935), which record the placelore of his home. Tom calls the eastern cliffs beneath Dun Aonghasa *Aill an Eala* (the cliff of the swan), while the western overhangs are *Carraig an Smail* (the rock of perdition). The latter name was coined when Aran boatmen found a body in their nets and, recoiling from its smell and appearance, returned it to the water; it was the corpse of a neighbour, fallen when fishing for wrasse from the clifftop. The boatmen's failure to bring the body for burial rankled for decades.

A small cave below the Dun is *Poll an Tobac* (the hole of the tobacco) where goods from wrecked ships were hidden from customs men. The *ailleadoir* (cliffmen) who inspired Tom's writing worked these rocks each day and knew routes along *aragaint* (ledges) and *strapai* (stairs) that led to marine, mineral, avian and salvaged wealth. These were vertiginous pathways, movement subject to a skewed, sideways physics, yet they were as familiar as the island's fields or lanes and just as productive. Robinson stresses the geography of resources among the many cliff-face placenames such as *Leic an tSalainn* (the flagstone of salt) that

indicate where life's necessities might be found or made. Other placenames evoke sites from which feathers were collected for export and eggs and bird-meat found for local subsistence. But the routes are now disused and lost in rockfalls and Robinson, following O'Flaherty, is unusual in having paid any attention to this lifeway:

I see these heroes as bent, wheezy little old men with a comic turn of phrase, for that is how the islanders I talk to recall them; it seems that those vigils on the windy ledges were conducive to wit as well as to catarrh (Robinson, 1986, 113-14).

**Comment [P15]:** more ref details needed

Some, Robinson suggests, brought the savagery of the cliff-face home: one man raised peregrine and raven chicks to force into cock fights. Robinson's vision is always material but always also human, delighting in exploration of the interventions of terrain and elemental powers in human life as well as in the stories the agency of place produces. Between them, Robinson and the O'Flahertys provide a psychogeography of a small space that would otherwise seem at first sight to be without human traces or historical potential.

Few stretches of the coastline of Ireland or Britain have had a scholar like Tim Robinson to compile their histories in map and book. All have such stories, because all have been subject to human use. Walking, paddling and talking are ideal means to collect and comprehend the vast, diverse coastlore and thus reveal histories that put cities in perspective. Robinson's work is so staggering in scale that it can seem to possess a monolithic completeness. It is perhaps most productively read not as an all-encompassing elaboration of a single place, but as an instigation to find in coastal landscapes the traces of past amphibious subsistence and to allow these to inform a re-examination of what it means to live in Britain or Ireland as well as what constitute key themes in their modern histories. It is suggestive of precisely the reconsideration of the hegemony of urban modernity that is coming to seem necessary.

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In an economy of knowledge where regionality and the diversity of geographies inspires an extraordinary amount of publishing, but where British and Irish history that issues from

universities remains surprisingly urban, there is much to be said for recovering something of Trevelyan or Haldane's sense that movement in the form of slow locomotion can be a powerful driver for expanded historical awareness. This would mean folding into history the ethos of ecocritics and geographers such as Robinson. It would entail attentiveness to space and to the very different temporalities of the coastal past (Lloyd, 2008). And travel over water, which can map onto past experiences of the world in ways that modern cultures of land travel often obscure, has particular potential to increase those sensitivities. The challenge is to find a method that permits the stories layering each place to speak, channelling all Trevelyan's commitment to history as art and to movement as counter-cultural act, while using that method to address a politics that has little in common with his worldview, retaining half a century's commitment to history from below, while finding ways to address the attention to human meaning-making characteristic of the linguistic turn to the pressing context of Anthropogenic threat. In his cultural study of a single species, the environmental historian Peter Coates **exhorts** readers to 'Remember, you are a salmon'; I am not sure I would go that far, but it is certainly time historians recognised that only a thin veneer of extremely modern urbanity hides humans from their essence as aquatic apes (Coates, 2006, 178).

**Comment [P16]:** exhorts

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